

# In the Blink of an Eye

By Lt. Todd Endicott

“Beeftestak, Claw, I’m heading to marshal.”  
“Roger, Claw.”  
Although these comms appear routine, they were preceded by a harrowing episode; a near mid-air overhead a carrier in the South Pacific between our EA-6B Prowler and an S-3B tanker. Our spring deployment was well underway, and my crew was pulling yet another night flight.

The evening was cloudless, dark, and no moon. I was flying in the front right seat for a night suppression of enemy-air-defenses (SEAD) mission. Feeling comfortable with night ops, we decided to grab a few routine practice plugs at the end of our cycle. Before our launch, we had coordinated with a double-cycle tanker to meet us overhead the carrier.

Our mission complete, we contacted the tanker and agreed to meet at Angels 8. We proceeded inbound at Angels 7.5 and, once established, began slowing to 250 knots. My pilot set a 30-degree, angle-of-bank left turn to establish the rendezvous. Based on air-wing-tanking procedures, we planned to remain at Angels 7.5 until we had the tanker in sight. Looking right to clear the belly, I spotted an anti-collision light at 2 o’clock, but I couldn’t determine its aspect. I called traffic to the crew, but my pilot and ECMO 2—right side, aft cockpit—couldn’t see the aircraft because of our angle of bank and the thick Grumman Ironwork’s canopy bow.

I looked back in the cockpit as I felt my aircraft’s nose rise. The jet ballooned through 8,300

feet as we slowed. My pilot worked to correct the trim settings. Seeing him make corrections to return to our briefed altitude, I resumed lookout to the right. By this time, the anti-collision light I had seen was transformed into a shocking sight. Our lower anti-collision light illuminated the entire top wing of an S-3 as it passed below us. I didn’t have a chance to make a directive call before my pilot asked, “What was that?” as we listened to the distinctive sound of a Hoover pass below us.

“Our tanker,” I replied, with a lump in my throat. The cockpit was very quiet for the next few moments. We told the tanker we were heading to marshal.

After landing, the S-3 pilot paid a visit to our ready room. He and his Viking had arrived overhead at Angels 8. His first sight of us was when he read the serial number from our centerline drop tank! He pushed 40 degrees, nose low and recovered at 3,000 feet. His copilot never saw us. In the ready room, we discussed our mistakes, thanked the powers-that-be for saving us, then headed to mid-rats.

Lt. Endicott flies with VAQ-136.

*Analyst note: There has been a substantial increase over the years in aircrew-skill-based errors and mishaps, particularly in basic flying skills like instrument scan. This article makes a great point about how a simple breakdown in one of these fundamental skills can be very unforgiving. Your basic flying skills always need to be there and will be tested when you least expect it. Stay sharp.—Cdr. Buzz Bauers is the aircraft operations division officer, Naval Safety Center. 🦅*

